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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 JERUSALEM 000231

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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MAYOR WRESTLES WITH "LOCAL" POLITICS ON  
INTERNATIONAL STAGE

REF: A. 08 JERUSALEM 2035

[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 165

[1](#)C. 09 JERUSALEM 783

[1](#)D. 09 JERUSALEM 2273

[1](#)E. 09 JERUSALEM 2106

[1](#)F. 09 JERUSALEM 2063

[1](#)G. 09 JERUSALEM 1991

[1](#)H. JERUSALEM 32

[1](#)I. 09 JERUSALEM 1790

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein  
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Assessing the performance of Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat in his first year in office, Barkat's aides, allies, and opponents point to the difficulty the "apolitical" Barkat (a former software executive) has had in managing a broad coalition containing a diversity of religious-nationalist, secular, and ultra-orthodox factions, as well as business community and youth advocates. Barkat's colleagues and critics note that in many cases, policy goals touted by the mayor during his 2008 campaign, such as the importance of socio-economic investment and improved municipal services, were lost in a crush of special-interest issues, such as the debate over the court-ordered demolition of the settler-inhabited "Beit Yehonatan" apartment building and ultra-orthodox protests over economic activity on the Jewish sabbath. Barkat's office portrays him as intent on pushing ahead with a centrist, pro-business agenda, but also hobbled by warring allies seeking political advantage, sometimes at his expense. End Summary.

BARKAT APPROACH IN 2009: "BUSINESS, NOT POLITICS"  
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[1](#)2. (C) In November 2008, political independent and software entrepreneur Nir Barkat won 52 percent of the vote in Jerusalem's mayoral race, and declared victory over ultra-orthodox candidate Meir Porush (Ref A). At the start of 2009, Barkat replaced his predecessor Uri Lupolianski -- Jerusalem's first ultra-orthodox mayor (elected in 2003) -- and declared his intent to implement an agenda focused on public services, economic growth, promotion of "cultural tourism," and the unification of a city divided by deep socio-economic rifts (Ref B). According to Barkat aides and political allies, optimism ran high at the start of 2009 that Barkat's "business, not politics" approach to governance would reconcile warring factions within Barkat's coalition by re-focusing attention away from ideological in-fighting and Jerusalem-related final status issues, onto improved living standards and municipal efficiency. Barkat also enjoyed the apparent advantage of counting nearly all elected city council members (32 of 33) as partners in his governing

coalition.

REALITY: 2009 A YEAR OF "PUTTING OUT FIRES"

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13. (C) In conversations with DepPolChief on February 2, mayoral advisor Stephan Miller admitted that the intense focus of international attention and the fragility of the mayor's actual political base had resulted in Barkat spending most of his first year in office "putting out fires," rather than focusing on long-term policy goals. In the course of dousing the flames, Barkat's critics argue, campaign promises for systemic reform fell hostage to special-interest issues. In particular, they say, Barkat's pledges to unite Arab-majority East and overwhelmingly Israeli West Jerusalem into a cohesive metropolis through re-zoning and improved provision of social services -- a stance appealing to ultra-nationalist and left-wing Israeli voters alike -- had by February 2010 been reduced to a prop in the long-running debate over the court-ordered evacuation of Beit Yehonatan, a single illegally-constructed apartment building in the overwhelmingly-Arab Silwan neighborhood (Ref E) occupied by Israeli settlers, which is named in honor of convicted spy Jonathan Pollard.

RE-ZONING PROPOSALS FALL AFOUL OF FACTIONAL POLITICS

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14. (SBU) Political wrangling over the fate of Beit Yehonatan, currently owned and occupied by the ultra-nationalist Ateret Cohanim organization, continued into 2010. In January, city attorney Yossi Havilio, Israeli

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Attorney General Menachem Mazuz, and State Prosecutor Moshe Lador urged Barkat in letters (later leaked to the press) to enforce the court-ordered evacuation and sealing of the building. In response, Deputy Mayor David Hadari briefly froze the municipal demolition budget in late January, seeking guarantees that city funds would not be used to demolish Beit Yehonatan. On February 3, Barkat responded by letter to Lador, saying that he would enforce the court order under protest, but that the Israeli government's "sabotage" of his "plan" to resolve the issue of illegal construction in Jerusalem through re-zoning left the municipality no option but to proceed on an additional 200 demolition orders against Arab homes and businesses in East Jerusalem.

THREAT TO MOVE ON DEMOLITIONS HYPOTHETICAL

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15. (C) Barkat aide Miller told DepPolChief on February 4 that Barkat's threat to move forward on the demolition of Beit Yehonatan and other East Jerusalem structures was largely hypothetical, saying, "we're still pursuing an agreement (that would prevent Beit Yehonatan's evacuation). This is just to make it clear that either way, we have to act with consistency." Miller conceded that the mayor's linkage of implementation of the court order against Beit Yehonatan with the larger issue of home demolitions in Arab neighborhoods was essentially a political maneuver, but argued, "sometimes it's better to be smart than to be right." Miller said that Barkat, by "standing up to an un-elected, clearly left-wing" legal establishment, was "expressing the wishes" of the voters who elected him.

PRIVATE CONSENSUS AMONG NATIONALISTS, THEIR OPPONENTS?

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16. (C) Palestinian lawyer Ziad Kavar, who represents Silwan residents, noted that the mayor's linkage of Beit Yehonatan and East Jerusalem home demolition issues had created a private consensus among city council members and Jerusalem activists across the political spectrum, with ultra-nationalists eager to defend Beit Yehonatan at any cost, and left-wing representatives of the Meretz party

equally intent upon preventing large-scale demolitions in East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods. Such a coalescing of partisan interests was rare in 2009, despite what appeared on paper to be overwhelming support for Barkat among city councilors, which he often invoked. Home demolitions generally proved a zero-sum issue for Barkat, energizing radical pro-settlement supporters ("We're very happy with him," Ateret Cohanim spokesman Daniel Luria told DepPolChief) and eliciting bitterly critical public comments from left-wing activists, many of whom reluctantly supported Barkat against his ultra-orthodox rival in the 2008 mayoral race. "He's acting like a West Bank settler," said Sarah Kreimer of the NGO Ir Amim, in response to Barkat's threat to move forward on 200 property demolitions if forced to evacuate Beit Yehonatan, "exactng a price tag when he's forced to follow the law."

#### HETEROGENEOUS ELECTORAL BASE CREATES HEADACHES

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17. (SBU) Barkat's efforts to build sustainable political support throughout 2009 were complicated by the heterogeneity of his 2008 electoral base, which included not only Zionist religious-nationalists and secular Israelis, but also the Gerrer Hasidic group, which broke away from the ultra-orthodox Porush and cast a mass protest vote for the "secular candidate," Barkat, following an internal rift in 2008 amongst Haredi factions over control of Hasidic schools. The Gerrer vote proved crucial for Barkat, given that the roughly 35 percent of Jerusalem's electorate consisting of its Arab population traditionally boycotts municipal polls, and another 27 percent -- the ultra-orthodox -- generally votes as a bloc. With 41 percent turnout in Jerusalem in the 2008 poll, the Gerrer decision to split from other ultra-orthodox factions and mobilize for Barkat appears statistically to have cost Porush the election.

#### ULTRA-ORTHODOX, BUSINESS INTERESTS CLASH

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18. (SBU) Barkat's attempts to reconcile an unexpected ultra-orthodox constituency and a pro-business agenda foundered in June 2009, when the municipality's decision to allow a Jerusalem parking lot serving Old City tourists to open on the Jewish sabbath sparked violent demonstrations in the city center, led by the non-Zionist Eda Haredit sect.

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The Gerrer Haredi, despite what local media described as private assurances to Barkat to stay out of the fray, soon joined in the weekly protests, which developed into full-blown riots on July 14, 2009, when an ultra-orthodox Eda Haredit woman was arrested on child abuse charges. On July 15, Barkat halted municipal services to the ultra-orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, whose streets were lined with burning trash dumpsters and shouting crowds. The summer's demonstrations eventually faded, but were revived in force in November 2009 when ultra-orthodox crowds of several thousand began to gather weekly at Intel's Jerusalem plant to protest its continued operation on the sabbath.

#### DISTRACTIONS OF CHIEF RABBI RACE, INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM

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19. (C) The conflicted interests of Barkat's constituents became further entangled in early 2010, when Barkat's attempts to fulfill a campaign promise to his religious-nationalist supporters to install a clearly Zionist (as opposed to ultra-orthodox) rabbi as one of Jerusalem's two chief rabbis (Sephardic and Ashkenazi) fell afoul of the ultra-orthodox Shas party, which countered with efforts to keep both positions for the haredim. On February 2, Barkat aide Miller spoke regretfully about the amount of time and attention Barkat had been forced to dedicate to the chief rabbi selection. Miller said Barkat had also been distracted throughout 2009 by international complaints about issues like

the expansion of the Israeli East Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo (Ref F), and the eviction of Arab families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah (Ref G), which fell into the ambit of Israel's national government and courts, rather than the municipality. Note: While this is true in the specific case of 2009 evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, which were court-ordered, the municipality is responsible for the majority of home demolitions in Jerusalem, most of which are administrative rather than judicial in nature. End note.

#### DEMOLITIONS ALIENATE ARAB RESIDENTS

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¶10. (C) Meanwhile, Barkat's repeated public statements about the need for improved public services and infrastructure in East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods won him few friends among Arab activists and East Jerusalem residents, in the absence of any tangible progress. In conversations with Post, these contacts focused instead on the municipal demolition of 65 Arab properties in East Jerusalem in 2009 (Ref H), and on Barkat's plans to displace the Palestinian residents of al-Bustan, south of the Old City, in order to erect a landscaped tourist park adjacent to the City of David archaeological site (Ref I), part of Barkat's broader scheme to revitalize Jerusalem's economy by attracting "cultural tourism." Former Palestinian Authority Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Hatem Abdel Qader said, of Barkat, "He's a racist. He's afraid of the demographic balance (in Jerusalem), and he's trying to destroy it through home demolitions. He's more dangerous than any other (past) head of the municipality. This is not (former mayor) Teddy Kollek."

#### ALLIES EXPRESS DOUBTS ABOUT PACE OF PROGRESS

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¶11. (C) Even Barkat allies who had avoided open confrontation with the mayor in 2009 expressed mild skepticism about the record of his first year in office. Ofer Berkowitz, elected to the city council in 2008 on the "Hitorerut" (Hebrew for "Awakening") ticket, which promoted job creation and affordable housing for young Jerusalemites, was unsure when he spoke to DepPolChief on February 2 whether Barkat would be able to stem the negative immigration of secular young people from the city. "A lot of people are disappointed," Berkowitz said. "Expectations were very high that the mayor would act quickly to improve the infrastructure of life, the job market, the housing market, public transportation, education. The mayor is doing some good acts, there are some good vectors, but the municipality is a big system, and people are not patient."

#### AN "APOLITICAL ENTITY" IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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¶12. (C) Mayoral aide Miller summed up the mood in Barkat's office by saying, "Looking back at 2009, the issues where we got hit on the head were all innately political. The mayor is trying to be an apolitical entity in a highly political environment." Miller noted that in 2010, Barkat intended to

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press ahead with his original agenda, and that the 2010 budget included significantly increased spending on cultural institutions, arts festivals, and business development. (According to Palestinian lawyer Kavar, the 2010 budget -- which has not been published in full -- also doubles the funds available for home demolitions.) Miller said, however, that the sheer breadth and diversity of Barkat's coalition would continue to generate friction. "Being in such a wide coalition puts the city council members in a very difficult position," he argued. "The mayor is the only non-politician. At the end of the day, all of the rest of them have to report to a national party, and keep up a good name for themselves."

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) Throughout 2009, Barkat presented himself in public as a smooth-talking leader enjoying overwhelming support from the city council, confident that his political strength -- and what he presented as a revolutionary approach to governing Jerusalem -- would yield a new, modern approach to city management unencumbered by the city's political, religious, social, and economic complexities. Conversations with close Barkat aides indicate, however, that since assuming office, Barkat has struggled -- often unsuccessfully -- with the realities of municipal governance, and with a coalition deeply fractured along political lines. Observers across the spectrum of opinion note that to date, Barkat has shown little of the navigational skill and political smarts displayed by his mayoral predecessors, be they Lupoliansky, Ehud Olmert, or Teddy Kollek.

RUBINSTEIN